

SOCIAL SERVICES FOR THE BLIND.

(by - Edith Abbott)

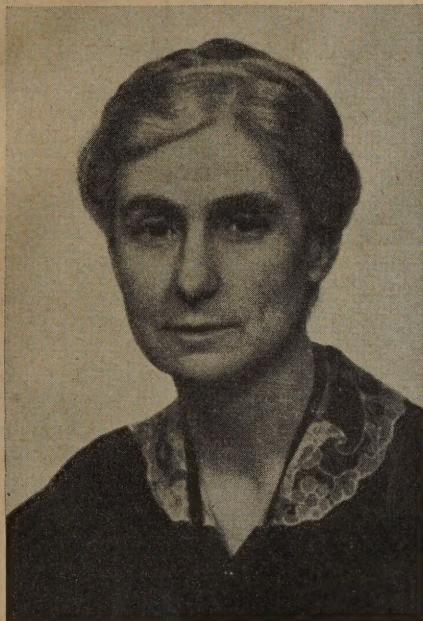
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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND**

Fraternity Project

Aid to the Blind and Sight Conservation



EDITH ABBOTT, Kappa

ANCHOR VARIOUS services for the blind have been developed by federal, state, and local authorities. But these are not always so effective as they should be. Because of their interest in programs to aid the blind, it has been suggested to me that our Delta Gammas will be interested in the general social service program in this field.

It would be a good plan if a committee were organized in every state where a Delta Gamma chapter is working for the blind—a special committee of active and alumnae members to study the state program for the blind. This committee could find out what the state department of public welfare is doing for the blind—how adequate the program is, and whether there is a competent and well-trained staff to carry it out. The program in any one state¹ could then be compared with programs of other states.

This committee should know, for example,

Social Services for the Blind

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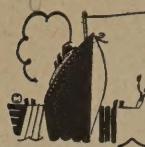
The General Committee for Aid to the Blind and Sight Conservation wishes to thank Miss Edith Abbott for her most interesting article, and to thank Mrs. Joy Bowerman, at whose suggestion it was written. We wish to call this article to the special attention of those Delta Gamma groups not actively participating in Fraternity Project work. To the many groups which have been working with the blind for the past eight years this is familiar material. To the inactive groups, we hope it will provide food for earnest thought and many suggestions for starting their aid to the blind.

LOIS ROBINSON RICHTER, Chairman

whether the state has a policy of helping local public schools to set up special classes for blind children and children with defective vision—that is, what are often called "sight-saving classes." A century ago many states provided state schools for blind children, but today it is understood that these handicapped children will have a better opportunity for normal development if they can live at home like normal children and associate with sighted children. Does your state have one of the old schools for the blind? And is your state doing what it should to provide grants-in-aid to the local educational authorities to set up special classes so that such children can remain at home? Is the old state school for blind children still needed, or could these children be better cared for now in the local public schools? Unfortunately, some of these state schools are not really "old" except for the fact that they follow an old policy. Not long ago, a state that is usually

¹ One of the very good books on work for the blind is Harry Best, *Blindness and the Blind in the United States*. But every chapter committee should be familiar with the report of the state department of public welfare, which should, and usually does, give a reasonably satisfactory account of the state program for aid to the blind.

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PORTS of CALL

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progressive in welfare organization actually built and equipped and is using an expensive new state school for the blind near a large city where good classes in the regular schools could have been provided for the children needing them. Of course, state leadership and state financial help are needed if the local schools are to maintain good classes for blind children and for children with defective vision. But state help can be given, and usually will be given, if there is a group who are interested enough to ask for it. The per capita expenditures in these schools for the blind are usually high. What is the total annual cost of your state school for the blind if you have one and what is the enrolment and what is the per capita expenditure?

Most of the blind are persons in the older age groups who have become blind in later life and need to learn a new way of life. Only 5 per cent of the blind are under fifteen years of age, and another 5 per cent are between the ages of fifteen and thirty. From this point the number of blind in each age group increases—20 per cent are between the ages of thirty and fifty, but nearly two-thirds of all the blind have passed the age of fifty. Many of those who are called blind are no longer able to work at their regular occupations, but they have some vision left, and their greatest need is for a first-rate ophthalmologist who will determine whether such vision, as is still present, may be preserved or whether vision may be restored by proper treatment. A good medical social worker on the welfare department staff should have special experience in the ophthalmological field to be of first-rate service here, to reassure the persons and the family if an operation is advised and to help make the necessary plans. This medical social worker must know all about the condition that needs treatment. She must also know the patient's social situation, and she must be prepared to help with a careful follow-up of the physician's recommendations for the later care and treatment of the patient.

The recently blinded adult person will need the services of a home teacher if the state department of public welfare maintains a division of services for the blind, as it should. Home teachers for the blind were first provided forty years ago. Does your state have any home teachers? The home teacher makes the rounds to the homes of different blind persons to teach

them to read Braille and to learn to do various things that he or she has done before, in the home, in the office, in the workshop, in the community—things that may need to be done differently and for which new confidence and a hopeful assurance are necessary, now that the person is blind. Many of these home teachers are blind themselves and have learned to live successfully in spite of their handicap. What about libraries for the blind in your state? Are books in Braille available for those who have learned to read Braille? And are there any of the talking book machines which the American Foundation for the Blind has helped to make available? These machines resemble phonographs, and the records, which are recordings of books, are sometimes loaned from a local public library. Lists of records loaned by the library may be sent to visually handicapped persons, and the records wanted can then be mailed to the blind person without charge.

Does your state have a good plan for helping the blind to find employment? Is there a good plan for vocational training? Has any study been made of employment opportunities for the blind in your state?

Re-education of the blind person is often an important part of the program. This may be education for a new trade, or it may be re-education for the business of living, for recreation as well as for employment.

There are various federal and state programs for aid to the blind, but they are not so well understood or so well coördinated as they should be. The federal government has long made it possible for blind persons in the proper age groups to obtain help for "vocational rehabilitation." Until last year, the blind were not adequately helped under this program, but the new vocational rehabilitation service set up under the Act passed in the summer of 1943 makes very special plans for helping blind persons in coöperation with the division for the blind in the state welfare departments. This help may mean financial assistance while attending a law school or a school of social service, or learning how to become a piano tuner, or how to follow some other useful occupation that is within the range of the preparatory work and general interest of the blind individual. Under the older program, the blind did not get so much help as the crippled got

from vocational rehabilitation funds, but this has been changed by the 1943 Act. The state department of education which now administers the federal vocational rehabilitation funds is of great assistance in providing training and professional education for large numbers of blind people. Many lessons have been learned, during the present war, as to the vocational training that may be used by blind persons, and many blind persons are now working in war industries. A recent bulletin of the Indiana Department of Public Welfare suggests a few of the vocations in which the blind have been very successful: "selling, clerical work, law, teaching, and social work." But an experienced and skillful adviser is necessary for satisfactory placement. The Indiana Public Welfare Department suggests that social case-work studies are necessary to find for each blind applicant the opportunity which will offer him the greatest scope for his abilities, and the welfare worker "must approach employers on the basis that there are job applicants who have skills required in specific businesses but who happen to be blind," and these welfare workers must try to find the jobs that these blind applicants would do if they could see.

The federal government in 1935, when the Social Security Act was passed, provided for cash grants to the blind by means of a federal-state program, the federal government matching the grants made by the states. But cash grants without a good social service program do not meet the needs of the blind. The Social Security Act provided that the Social Security Board should administer the Aid to the Blind provided for in the Act. Very unfortunately, most of the states have followed the policy of the Social Security Board and have "integrated" the Aid to the Blind with Old Age Assistance and Aid to Dependent Children instead of integrating the Aid to the Blind with the other services to the blind furnished by the state welfare departments. That is, the so-called "integration" policy of the Social Service Board has been "integration" in the wrong direction.

The Board's policy is "integration" on the basis of a means test, instead of on the basis of the services needed. In some states, Aid to the Blind is not even placed in the state welfare department but is off in a state public assistance department in spite of the fact that other services for the blind have been placed in the welfare department. It is important to know what is being done in the state in which you are working, and it may be hoped that some time all the tax-supported work for the blind will be brought together in a single division of the state welfare department. In some states, this cash grant is available to persons who meet a "needs test" at the age of sixteen. There are many services in the way of further education, employment, ophthalmological care, and recreation that these young blind persons will need for a long period of years. Cash grants, formerly called "pensions" are not enough. In very few states are the blind getting the help they need.

What does all this have to do with our Delta Gamma chapters and their interest in work for the blind? Well, if this interest is genuine, it should be intelligently directed. This can only be done if the resources of the state and the federal government are clearly understood so that the Delta Gamma group can help in making the work more adequate. The largest number of blind persons can be reached only by the public services. Therefore, it is important for each one of us to know what these public services are and how satisfactory they are in our own states and to be prepared to work intelligently for better services for the long future.

In some states there may be a good private society or a privately conducted workshop for the blind, and this is all to the good, but only the public services can reach all those in need of help in all parts of the state, and it is the ninety and nine who are beyond the reach of the private agencies that must be reached by the public welfare services.



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